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Fig. 1: Herd rests before the Casorsos' Kelowna shop at Bernard and Pandosy streets, c. 1914

KELOWNA MUSEUM

Italians in British Columbia: A Short History Part 1: The First Wave by Lorne Hammond

Families with Italian roots have made a rich and significant contribution to the history of BC. In several waves of immigration, they arrived to build the province – as agricultural pioneers, early miners, industrial workers, community founders, industrious citizens and community leaders. Their story has close links to three networks: the railway, boarding houses run by women, and men's and women's lodges. Each played an important role in making their communities – and thus BC – stronger.



Fig. 2: Carolina Buchignani's vanity case, pre-1914, Trail, BC

AGATHA LOPEZ, RBCM

The first Italian to arrive in BC was a naval officer in the service of Spain: Captain Alejandro Malaspina, who anchored briefly in Nootka Sound in 1791. By the 1840s, Italians such as Father John Nobili, a Jesuit, were among the missionaries working in the Okanagan. By 1883, a prominent family, the Casorso family from Piedmont, was managing the fields of the Catholic Mission at Kelowna and pioneering several of the Okanagan's agricultural industries. They introduced Australian-style sheep farming, raised herds of pigs to supply their "Sanitary Market" butcher shop (fig. 1) and, half a century later, began to grow grapes commercially. Today, their Pioneer Ranch store is just down the road from the original mission site.



Fig. 3: Mrs. Carlo Bossi, Victoria

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Italians were among the great influx of miners to BC that started with the 1858-59 Fraser River Gold Rush. Some were successful, as noted in one 1861 newspaper story about three Italian miners who returned to Victoria with \$12,000 in Cariboo gold. Others arrived as merchants and suppliers. Carlo Bossi came via San Francisco, settled with his wife (fig. 3) in Victoria, opened several stores there and also supplied a small network of Italian merchants and shop-keepers in the BC Interior. Two of his descendants, nieces Olga and Anita Bossi, taught generations of Victoria's elementary school children until the 1960s.



By the 1880s, Italian merchants and businesses were established in communities such as Genoa Bay, Nanaimo and Kamloops. The largest group were in Vancouver. As they prospered, they helped shape BC's urban landscape and culture. Evidence of their contributions can be seen everywhere, from architectural landmarks to new foods on the table. Angelo Calori turned a hotel he had bought after the Great Fire of 1886 into one of Vancouver's well-known features: the triangular-shaped Europe Hotel in Gastown. In 1906, the Tosi family and other importers began to bring foods such as olive oil to supply the growing Italian community and beyond. They remain in business today on Main Street in Vancouver.

The railway played an important role in early Italian immigration. It was an employment source, drawing many Italian men to work on railway construction or to apprentice in the machine shops of Montreal. It was also a rapid information network. Word spread quickly about job opportunities among the new mines, smelters, sawmills and the nuclei of small Italian communities along its lines.

Kamloops is a good example of a railway-based Italian community. In 1880, Kamloops became a railway division headquarters. Workers began to bring their families over from Italy to settle permanently. A railway job was also used as a stepping stone to other opportunities. Pasquale (Cap) Capozzi arrived in BC in 1907 as a railway worker. He later worked in sawmills, grocery stores, managed the Italian Co-op in Trail, opened his own store in Kelowna – and in the 1930s, established the Calona Winery.

Other Italians came to work in BC's emerging resource industries. In jobs created by the 1890s Kootenay mining boom, they worked mines in Rossland and Greenwood. In Trail, a wonderful Italian community developed in "The Gulch," a neighbourhood in a ravine below the Cominco smelter. Isaac Georgetti was among the Italians who arrived in Trail sometime between 1895 and 1897, at the site of the new smelter. The company owner encouraged him to run a hotel with his wife, Katerine. Other families soon joined them in Trail, and all took an active role in helping other Italians to become established.

Italian women played a crucial role in defining these early communities. The mechanism was

running the boarding houses, which acted as the gateway into the community. Here, new immigrants received credit, help finding a job and advice, learned a new language, kept their ties with Italy and entered the life of their new home. By operating the boarding houses, women subsidized the living costs of working men and made it possible for them to accumulate savings on their wages. The boarding house would remain important for post-1947 immigrants, too. (See Laura Quilici's excellent master's thesis "I Was a Strong Lady" [History, SFU 1992]).

Fig. 4: The "Coke Oven" bachelors who lived together behind the ovens that processed coal, Michel, BC

COURTESY OF ROSALIE FORNASIER, SPARWOOD

Elsewhere in the resource sector, Italians arrived to build both the economy and communities. In the coalfields of Fernie, Michel and Natal, and out to Alberta's Crowsnest Pass, they were a substantial part of the workforce (fig. 4). The small size of company towns, close living conditions and the shared dangers of mining forged strong community solidarity. Italians helped rebuild Fernie after a 1908 fire had practically destroyed it. Now, Michel and Natal are gone and their populations have moved to Fernie and Sparwood, but the community spirit of BC Italians remains a tangible part of life in the Elk River Valley.



Fig. 5: The Finishing Room Crew, Powell River Pulp Mill, 1926

DONATED BY ELIO COSSARIN, POWELL RIVER

The same strong sense of community – and stories of pioneer courage – exists in Powell River (fig. 5). Families began arriving in 1910 at the province's first pulp and paper mill. Among them were women who made their own way there, such as Ida Toigo who travelled 11,200 km (7,000 mi) from Italy to New York to Powell River to join her future husband, Louis Scarpolini. A second wave of immigrants joined the Powell River community after 1947. While Powell River's Italian Community Club recently celebrated 60 years of community service, history shows that the Italian presence there predates this by a quarter century.



Fig. 6: Sisters of Columbo Banquet, October 20, 1931

CRISTOFORO COLUMBO LODGE ARCHIVES, TRAIL

The Italian language, the parish and the family were important in nurturing ties in these early communities. Less well known is the role played by men's and women's lodges. The first lodge in BC, *Giordano Bruno*, was founded in 1899 by Angelo Maura in Rossland. Trail's *Cristoforo Columbo* Lodge, founded in 1905, is one of the oldest existing lodges in the province, and possibly in Canada. Early men's lodges provided medical benefits to injured workers and insurance to widows. Trail's women founded their own organization, the Sisters of Columbo, in 1924 (fig. 6). Members



provided care for hospitalized workers through the Committee of Flowers; they also raised money to help new mothers purchase cribs and child-care items, and ran social events.

Italian lodges or societies were eventually established throughout the province. Among them are Vancouver's early *Societ di Mutuo Soccorso Figli d'Italia* (Sons of Italy Mutual Aid Society) and its affiliated women's organization, the *Lega Femminile Italiana*, the Italian-Canadian Mutual Aid Society, regional clubs such as the *Societ Veneta*, the *Famee Furlane* and specialty groups such as the Italian Bicycle Club from Sacred Heart parish.

Early lodges began as a social safety net. When government and the union movement took over these functions, their role became predominantly cultural. Lodges established Italian bands and organized barbecues, *bocce* tournaments, banquets, dances, community theatre productions and opera performances. But lodge minutes of early meetings also show there was concern about how to harmonize an Italian community of diverse origins and dialects.

By the 1920s, lodges were a bridge between the generations. In this way, they helped BC Italians preserve the culture and language of their roots while continuing to assist new immigrants and build strong community ties.

Fig. 1: Italian Arch, Homer Street, erected for the Vancouver visit of the Duke of Connaught, 1912

CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVES, ARCH 5

Part 2: The Second Wave by Lorne Hammond

The first wave of Italian immigration to BC began in the 1880s. By 1912, Vancouver had a flourishing "Italian Colony" (fig. 1), but by the 1920s, the flow of arrivals was slowed because of North American immigration quotas. Canadian and Italian restrictions halted it completely by 1931.



At this point in BC's history, hardworking people of Italian descent frequently faced resentment. They were regarded – in many newspaper editorials – as transients and not the sort of people who would make a lasting contribution to a community. This view, combined with high unemployment and Italy's neutrality at the start of World War I, led to a backlash. It subsided quickly when Italy joined the Allies, and many BC Italians served in the Canadian or Italian army.

In the 1930s, Fascism was debated and also opposed within BC's Italian community. But for most, this political issue seemed distant and theoretical.

That changed on June 10, 1940, with Italy's Declaration of War. Under the *War Measures Act*, small numbers of Italians were arrested and interned at places such as the Kananaskis Internment Camp near Banff. (I recommend the National Film Board video *Barbwire and Mandolins* for a moving portrayal of this part of history.) Generally speaking, there were far fewer arrests

in BC than in Eastern Canada. Nor were whole families interned, as occurred with Japanese-Canadians. However, hundreds of Italian families who arrived in BC after 1922, the year Mussolini came to power in Italy, had to register with the RCMP and report monthly. The owner of the Venice Bakery in Vancouver recalls that he was advised to "play it safe" and change the name of his family business. He refused.

Fig. 2: Armando Gris, honoured WWII veteran from Trail's "Gulch"

CITY OF TRAIL ARCHIVES

In resource towns such as Trail, company managers interceded with the government to protect their Italian-Canadian workforce. Trail's war hero Armando Gris (fig. 2) was one example among many with an Italian background who served in the Canadian Armed Forces. Others worked on Red Cross relief programs. But unfair treatment during the war left deep wounds in the generations who had lived in BC for decades.



Fig. 3: Second-wave immigrants, some bound for Kamloops, sailing to Halifax, 1951

CRISTOFORO COLUMBO LODGE, KAMLOOPS

Restrictions on immigration from Italy ended in 1947. A massive second wave of arrivals followed immediately, doubling BC's Italian population (fig. 3). Some obtained jobs in the traditional resource sector, such as the pulp mills, but they also worked for Alcan in Kitimat and on the dam at Revelstoke. The majority gravitated to urban centres, where men often entered Vancouver's construction, importing or restaurant industries and many Italian women worked in the textile mills. Others moved directly into the professions as architects, lawyers, nurses, doctors and teachers.



This new influx revitalized community pride, and "Little Italy" blossomed in East Vancouver. A vibrant street of shops and restaurants brought many non-Italians to Commercial Drive. The new wave of arrivals, building on the reputation and wisdom of the older families, broke down many of the remaining ethnic barriers. By the mid-1970s, the Italian Cultural Centre in Vancouver had opened. BC Italians have become judges, mayors, city councillors, cabinet ministers and members of Parliament.

This fall, the landmark exhibit *Leonardo da Vinci: Scientist, Inventor, Artist* arrived at the RBCM. It is focusing our eyes on the contributions of this famous Italian, but the Museum is also making sure that the story of BC's Italians is sharing the spotlight.

Fig. 4: Bocce players in Victoria Park, East Vancouver

CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVES, 392-859

Using stories, photographs and heirlooms collected from BC families of Italian descent, an RBCM travelling exhibit, *Festa Italiana! BC Celebrates Its Italian Heritage*, was created and, throughout October, visited Trail, Fernie and Sparwood, Kamloops, Vancouver and Powell River. We will report on the tour in a future issue of *Discovery*.



There is much still to learn about the history of BC Italians. The RBCM remains interested in the regional component of immigration, in tracing where Italian families have come from and how immigration patterns have changed over time. I invite you to contact the Museum or your local archives with information. Preserving community history often starts with preserving your family's *own* story – and then sharing it.

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